

# Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

*"A man going to a pond (where it seems a pike had devoured all the fish) to water his mule, had a pike bite his mule by the lips, to which the pike hung so fast, that the mule drew him out of the water, and by that accident the owner of the mule got the pike ..."* wrote Izaak Walton in "The Compleat Angler" (1653).

While there are easier ways to catch pike, I'd try anything at the moment. It's the first full week of March, 28 degrees outside and snowing. The weather in itself isn't surprising for the time of year, it's just that we were wearing shorts and sandals four days ago – and the open water fishing seemed this close – but now the ground is white.

March, like the pike in Walton's story, can strike and bite you someplace tender just when you started thinking that winter is history. When, in reality, it could be weeks before the ice starts to creep away from the edges, revealing the skinny water near shore where some of the best early-season fishing takes place.

While nonanglers rib us for occasionally stretching the truth (*"Fishermen are born honest, but they get over it,"* – Ed Zern, 1945) and other such nonsense, one of our biggest failings is our gullibility. We fish in the pouring rain because the weather guru on TV says it's going to let up and we believe him; while under the influence of cabin fever, we buy fishing tackle and gadgets that are advertised to catch us more fish, but seldom do; and every March we nearly throw a shoulder out reaching for tackle boxes and rods at the first sign of shirtsleeve weather, only to be rebuffed by snow, cold ... reality.

The good thing about March is that April follows and by now we're fishing. The weather can still be dicey, but it goes almost unnoticed if the fish are biting. Worse case scenario is being driven off the water and retreating to someplace warm, dry and hospitable while the worst of the weather passes.

After ice-out when waters warm into the 40s, female northern pike nose into the shallows with males in tow to broadcast sticky eggs. This puts them within easy reach for those of us who like to prowling the banks, working out winter's kinks in casting arms and legs.

The artificial bait we're using is big and gaudy, surely silly looking to passersby. They're made of dyed rabbit fur, deer hair and other ingredients that, when tied to a big hook, can leave a knot on the back of the head of the fly-rodder who doesn't duck on sloppy casts.

The baits imitate nothing and maybe everything, like fish, frogs, crayfish, mice or new-to-the-water ducklings. No matter, because this is not match-the-hatch fishing. You're simply trying to entice a fish, jazzed



because it's the spawning season, into smacking something out of hunger, or just plain orneriness.

It's at this time your odds are best to catch your biggest pike of the season; a fish as long as your leg that'll part the weeds and snatch your bait in a boil that will take your breath away. In a perfect world, we'll all catch a pike like this, and then cradle it in our arms like a newborn calf for the tack-sharp magazine cover photo.

Northern pike, like in Walton's account, have a long history in freshwater fish tales. In Europe, for example, where scientists tell us pike have a tendency to grow bigger than those fish in North America, capricious stories were once told of huge, ancient pike that pulled passing livestock and milk maids into the drink. Then there was the 267-year-old northern that was caught in the late 1400s, weighing in at 550 pounds.

All rubbish, of course.

It's not surprising, however, that northerns do grow big. They're lightning-quick eating machines that play the aquatic role of the fearless playground bully. A study done in the late 1950s in a Canadian lake had 2,594 pike eating in one year 112.5 tons of brown trout and a lesser amount of perch.

In another study, it was estimated that an average of 1.5 million waterfowl were eaten by northern pike on a single wildlife refuge in Michigan, coming in second only to the number of fish the pike ate.

The findings are still out, however, on studies involving livestock and milk maids.

